





# The Heyricke Letters,

ILLUSTRATING THE STATE OF LEICESTER IN THE REIGNS OF  
ELIZABETH AND JAMES I.

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*Read at a soirée of the Leicestershire Architectural and Archæological  
Society, held at Leicester, December 5, 1860.*

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ALL who have studied the history of Leicestershire are aware how large an amount of illustration it has received from the family papers preserved at Beaumanor. These valuable documents owe their preservation to certain old chests, which once belonged to Sir William Heyricke, in virtue of his office as a Teller of the Exchequer in the reign of James the First; and they principally consist of papers accumulated during the long life of that eminent man, but intermixed with others both of an earlier and a later date. Among these interesting memorials of past ages there are many letters which were written from this town in the 16th and 17th centuries, during which several members of the Heyricke family were flourishing inhabitants of Leicester; and, as the most prominent in interest of the whole, are to be regarded those of Alderman Robert Heyricke, an elder brother of Sir William,—not only from their containing the particulars of various remarkable local occurrences, but also from their offering a field rich in materials that may elucidate the state of society at that period, and the habits and usages then prevalent in a Midland Provincial Town. Though considerable extracts from this series of letters were published by my grandfather in the History of Leicestershire, yet I was led, on their perusal, to express my opinion that they would reward a closer examination—(an opinion communicated to our friend Mr. James Thompson, the living historian of your town, who has consequently requested me to give you some specimens of their contents.)—and, with the permission of Mr. Perry-Herrick, I have much pleasure in now proceeding to do so.

Time is perpetually deepening the shadows of the past, and rendering its former features more and more obscure. Manners, customs, and fashions are continually undergoing changes, individually small, and consequently unheeded and unrecorded on their occurrence, but which gradually remodel not only the external face



of society, but also its inner machinery, and the very tone and spirit of its schemes and speculations.

We cannot, therefore, wonder at the contrasts which are presented to our view after the oft-repeated and incalculable changes of two centuries and a half. When we turn from the England of Queen Victoria to the England of James the First, we revert to times not merely before the electric telegraph, before the railroad, before the steam engine, before gas, before paved streets, and other appliances of comparatively modern date, but before the newspaper, before the bank, before the general post, before the stage coach, and even before the stocking frame. And yet the Englishman of that day, and the Leicester man as much as his contemporaries, was eager for news, and very sensitive to any rumour of mischief from the Pope or Spain; he required money-dealers for the transactions of trade; he had correspondence with the metropolis and other towns; and was himself a traveller to a considerable extent, though with the measured steps and slow that were an exigence of his age. It is therefore not only strange to our notions, but in many respects instructive, to learn how these several operations were then effected; and on these points the letters of Robert Heyricke will supply us with various interesting particulars.

Leicester was not then a town of any considerable trade, nor of a large population. It had lost its ancient importance as a frequent residence of the junior branch of the royal house, when the Dukes of Lancaster maintained their princely household within—or rather just without—its walls. It had lost the influence of its Abbey, in which the fallen Wolsey breathed his last, and of its other religious foundations. It had suffered greatly from desolating pestilence and the oft-recurring plague. Its dimensions and general aspect have been well represented in the lithographic print appended by Mr. Thompson to his *History of Leicester*,—derived from the map or plan made by John Speed about the year 1600, but corrected and adjusted by modern measurements. The town had been reported by commissioners of the Duchy of Lancaster in 1587 to be in great decay, when it was said that thirty parishes were reduced to six, and four-and-twenty wards to ten.<sup>1</sup>

As to trade, Leicester was at that day very far distant from even the dawn of its modern career of commercial prosperity. It was indeed the county town, and the centre of a rich pastoral district. The wool of the surrounding flocks was usually brought to its market, and a wool-hall had been erected in the reign of Elizabeth; but little of this valuable product was wrought within the town. Efforts had been made from time to time to establish the manufacture of cloth, particularly that kind called kersey,<sup>2</sup> but with small success. In 1599, the mayor and burgesses, in an abject epistle to the Earl of Huntingdon, declare, “We have no clothing nor other exercises to maintain our poor, nor are we able to set up any.”<sup>3</sup>

(1) Thompson, pp. 282, 284.

(2) Nichols, i. 398, 399; Thompson, pp. 255, 265.

(3) Thompson, p. 303.

Of hosiery, which a century later became the staple manufacture of this district, there was certainly a little carried on, but the particulars of its history are scanty and obscure. We read in Mr. Thompson's History of the town,<sup>4</sup> that in the year 1597 the mayor and the burgesses, by the appointment of the Earl of Huntingdon, lent to Thomas Moseley, a townsman, the sum of £10, to set poor children at work in the knitting of Jersey stockings; and in a paper<sup>5</sup> preserved at Beaumanor—and which I think was probably placed in the hands of Sir William Heyricke when he was burgess in Parliament for the borough, it is stated that (in the reign of James I.) the hosiers of Leicester were compelled by some officers of Blackwell Hall (in London) to pay twopence on every score of stockings for hallage, unless they would take their stockings to the hall, there to be sold. They were also at composition with the Duke of Lennox for ulnage, and paid yearly to the Duke's collectors for the same.

Now, although the stocking-frame is usually stated to have been invented by William Lee so early as 1589, yet, as he is also related to have left England, and to have been working at Rouen until after the death of Henri IV. in 1610, I think it perfectly certain that the frame was not at that period in use at Leicester; and all the stockings that were then made, other than such as were cut out of pieces of cloth or linen (which had hitherto been the way of making hose), were knit by the hand.

In 1578 Mary Erycke writes from Leicester to her son William: "Furthermore, I have sent you a pair of knit hose, and a pair of knit Jersey gloves. I would have you send me word how they serve you; for if the gloves be too little for you, you should give them to one of your brother Hawes's children, and I would send you another pair."

There is a passage in one of the letters of Robert Heyricke, written in 1594, which is remarkable for the high value then set upon worsted hose: "I have sent up by Henry White this bringer 40 pair of good worsted hose, tied together in four bunches, which I pray you will sell for me for 12 li. or else lay them up in your press. I cannot afford them for less." This is the only allusion to hosiery in Robert Heyricke's letters; but in another letter addressed to William Heyricke at a still earlier date, on the 6th of March, 1582, and written from Leicester by Richard Hudson, there is a curious passage on this subject, which I think will amuse you if I extract it at length: "The cause of my writing unto you at this time is to let you understand that I have sent you the pair of knit stockens which you sent for by Richard Penne, and I have received a crown of him for them; they did cost five shillings at Doncaster"—(so that they were made far from Leicester, unless, having been made in this county, they were taken to Doncaster fair)—"and if you do not like them of the price, I pray you to get

(4) Thompson, p. 299.

(5) Inserted in the *Annals of Leicester*, in the History of Leicestershire, vol. i. p. 425, under the year 1613; but the original bears no date. The word "hallage" is there misprinted *ballage*; and again in Thompson's History of Leicester, 1849, p. 343.



"them coloured of the same colour as the stockens are which you had on your legs when I was with you,—I take it they were a murrey, and I will pay you for them, and will send you your five shillings again. Moreover, friend William Erycke, I have a pair of worsted stockens, the legs of them I pray you to get me a purse, a large one, made of them, with a lock ring, and I will pay you for it. I would have the fringe that shall go about it to be of silk."

This letter, I fear, will not have given you a very high estimate of the manufacturing resources of Leicester in the reign of Elizabeth. The town was not then one in which large fortunes were made by manufactures or trade. Robert Heyricke himself, though he had enjoyed a long and prosperous career, testifies to this circumstance in a remarkable passage of one of his latest letters. He is speaking of the settlement in marriage of one of his daughters, and is balancing the advantages between her alliance to a country gentleman (one of the Babingtons), or to a "merchant, a goldsmith, or any good tradesman" of the City. "You know (he writes) that all the good fortunes of our kinred came only by my mother's sister being placed in London; and I thank God that your placing there hath not only been your own preferment, but, by God's great blessing to you, you have been a great mean for the advancement of others. You know how poor and beggarly the country is, and that those who do live best, live nothing like to citizens of London, though they be not of the richest sort."

In this passage we have brought to our notice a remarkable change in the condition of London,—so far as the city is concerned. It was then not only a mine of wealth for the industrious and enterprising; it was full of life, luxury, and enjoyment: it is now a mere workshop for those who take their acquisitions to be enjoyed elsewhere.

But I proceed to those other contrasts between our own times and those of the Heyricke letters to which I before alluded; and none can possibly be greater than that which the two periods present in the matter of Public News. Where every day now issues forth throughout the country, in thousands of copies, its hundred sheets of varied and accurate intelligence, there was then nothing but the occasional pamphlet, such as that which described "the fearful and heavy news of the accident at Paris Gardens," of which a copy was sent by William Heyricke to his father in 1582. In the next year the young man transmitted, in manuscript, a copy of a letter sent to the Queen from the Great Turk; in return for which his father communicated one that had come to her Majesty from the King of Barbary. In other letters we read of books of occasional sermons, or those of my lord mayor's show, but of nothing of greater importance; except that one Christmas Sir William Heyricke is thanked by his brother for the books sent in his last letter, "and (he writes) 'I hope the reading of them will do many good,'—from which expression it may be supposed that they were of the nature of religious tracts.

In any form, very little public news seems to have reached the good town of Leicester. Occasionally, Sir William appears to have informed his brother of the placing and shifting of persons in high office, but such intelligence excited but little interest in the Leicester corporation: "for my part (says Mr. Mayor), I shall be content, do what they will." The matters which more profoundly agitated the public mind consisted of rumours chiefly remarkable for their false or exaggerated complexion.

Thus, when Henry Prince of Wales died in 1612, the popular report appears to have added that the King was dead also, or that something still more awful had occurred. The alderman's anxiety to hear from his brother had been greater than usual, "for here hath been such heavy news, that when we should have been merry with Mr. Mayor at his feast, we could not tell whether better to feast or fast; but, God be praised! now we hear it is not so ill as we then heard it, but great loss. If it had been the Lord's will to have appointed him life, it had been great comfort to us all, and great stay to the kingdom; but the Lord's will be done!"

The Gunpowder Treason of seven years before, when both King and Prince were to have been destroyed at a blow, had perhaps suggested this false alarm; but the dread which seems most frequently to have haunted the good Protestants of that day, was that of Popish invasion, as in September 1614—

"On Monday last here was such a rumour of a great army gathered together by the Pope, the Cardinals, the Prelates and Clergy, the King of Spain and the Emperor, to the value of 80,000 horse and foot, and that they were come into the Low Countries, and would shortly be here, that there was many in great fear, till some of our neighbours came from London, and brought somewhat better news. By your next I pray you certify us somewhat of the truth of the matter."

Again, in November 1615:—

"Here is such diversity of news, by such as come from London, as I can give credit to none almost, unless I have it under your hand. Here is news that my Lord of Northampton, who, it was said died here in England, is now living in Spain. Here is such talk of a great banquet that should come from Spain full of bad dishes, and to a most vile intent, that, if it may be true, there is no doubt dangerous plots devised by enemies from home; the Lord deliver his Majesty and all his, and all others that fear the Lord! It is said also that at that time this banquet should work its effect, Spinola should bring in 2,000 strong, and at his coming should burn the King's ships in the havens, which God forbid!"

On questions of general politics the alderman says absolutely nothing, but on a change of municipal policy upon the accession of a new mayor of Leicester, there is the following amusing passage:—"We have ventured on Mr. Bonnet for this year to come; and, though Mr. Manbye hath striven this year to reform strong ale, yet Mr. Bonnet saith it is a good refreshing to a poor man to have a cup of strong drink, though he have but little meat, and for his



“part he will not deprive them of it, but if he meet them at George Brook’s he will take part with them, say against it this year they that will.”

We will next notice what were the facilities for Written Correspondence. Though some posts had been established for the service of the government, they were not yet available for private persons. The usual mode of communication between Leicester and the metropolis was by carriers, of whom there seem to have been two in constant employment. But the townsmen were frequently making journeys to London, and did not start without offering their services to their friends and neighbours; and it was not yet illegal for them to carry letters; so that correspondence might be frequent, if not regular, or entirely free from mishaps and miscarriages. One of the alderman’s letters was to have been carried by one Blincorn, a workman, but, as the alderman was out of doors, the man was fain to lose the carriage of it (for which therefore he would have been paid), and it was afterwards taken by “a pottycary of our town: his name is Henshaw.” A letter was sometimes carried along the road beyond its destination: “your last letter I understand you sent by Sir Oliver Cromwell, but he forgetting it when he lay at the Angel, took it with him Northward, I do not know how far, and yesterday he sent it back by Mr. Harlow, who brought it to me.”

The majority of Travellers performed their journeys on foot. At the end of October, in 1614, Francis, the cook of Beaumanor, had a pitiful journey: he was eight days coming from London to Leicester. Those who could afford a horse travelled on horseback, and there are many passages respecting the provision of horses for Sir William by his brother, when the former was preparing to make his annual visit to Leicestershire. Robert Heyricke prided himself on his skill in horseflesh, and on one occasion he recommends to his brother “a very pretty gelding, as well-paced and easy-going as may be, only six years old, well made and clean of his legs, milk-white, with some small spots on him, his price £10; or, if you will have him whilst he is unsold, he shall be sent you up to bring you down, and if you like not of his price, you must give Fullwood 10s. for his journey, and deliver him safe again.” This passage shows the cost of hiring a horse for the journey to and from London. At another time the alderman writes, “This is a very ill place for to hire a horse in. I am sure I have sent to twenty several places, to such as I did hear were likely to have to let for a journey; but amongst all the butchers, and others, that were likeliest to do the feat, I could get but one, and he with such covenants that if he do not return within ten days, then 12d. a day—no less, for every day that he tarries beside.”

When people became too infirm, or otherwise unable, to ride on horseback, there was an end to their travelling. Such was the case with Robert Heyricke himself when he grew unwieldy in his old age. He tells his brother, “I long to see you, and to see you here; for I think I shall never desire to go to London to see any such



“sights as heretofore, and by your means, I have often seen. I feel “myself very unapt to ride.” In answer to this Sir William Heyricke appears to have suggested the resource of a caroché, a luxury then unknown in Leicester, unless when the king or some man of high rank passed through the town; but it offered a mode of travel so untried to the Leicester alderman, that he did not accept the proffered kindness without hesitation. “The last branch of your “letter speaketh of a new caroché, which you say will carry me very “easy when I am weary of my horse; but I must first make trial “here by some short journey, for I dare not make trial of so long a “circuit.”

If such were the difficulties attendant upon personal locomotion, before the days of railroads or stage-coaches, those connected with the Transmission of Money were still more embarrassing. It was extremely hazardous to send it along the road, for the bearers were very likely to meet with robbers or cozeners, either those who would despoil them by violence on the way, or cheat them when gambling at the inns. The Leicester alderman was generally too wary to incur such risk, but it was often with much trouble that he made his remittances in security. Sir William Heyricke and his brother, the goldsmith in London and the ironmonger at Leicester, were in fact bankers, though that designation was then unknown, and it was in transacting business resembling that which was performed by the modern banker that they both very largely increased their fortunes: but it is strange to observe the difficulties which frequently attended their primitive operations in banking. On the 5th of November, 1613, Robert writes, “Well! I have spoke and sent to all that be “likely in the market this day, and cannot find one to return (*i. e.* “to London) until the 17th of this present.” Again, on the 26th April, 1616, “I have such ado to return any money up, but they “will have all before hand or else no bargain; and I cannot tell cer- “tainly their soundness, which makes me quake when I do pay “them, and yet I am desirous to return it with what speed I may.” The best resource lay in the cattle dealers, who, having sold their beasts in London, were glad to leave their money safe in Cheapside, and take it again at Leicester: but their movements were irregular, and often dependant on the great fairs in the country, which influenced both the periods of their travelling and the roads they took. The alderman sometimes asked his brother to take up money in Smithfield, or “to try the butchers in Eastcheap, or “elsewhere, if any of them that come down to Rowell fair will leave “you 150li. or what you can receive by them; for I cannot return “any, but many come to me of the other side, to leave money with “me to have it in London.”

In connection with this subject may be noticed another monetary difficulty, which exhibited itself at a somewhat earlier date. At the time when William Heyricke was first settled in London he was repeatedly required to transmit small change to Leicester, where it was obviously very deficient, and its absence very inadequately sup-

plied by the worthless tokens<sup>6</sup> that traders then sometimes coined for themselves. On the 6th of March, 1582, Richard Hudson writes to him, "I pray you, good William, to send me 10s. in pence and two-pennies, if you can get them, and I will send you money for them." On the 8th of the same month his father thanks him for 20s. sent in new half-groats; and also for 20s. in pence and half-pence;<sup>7</sup> and on the 16th his brother John writes, "My father gives you most hearty thanks for the twopennies and the halfpence that you sent him: he sent you 20s. for them by Richard Penn." On the 31st of July his father thanks him for sending pence and halfpence; "they have done us great pleasure, for small money is yet scant in the country: your sister Hawes had sent half-a-crown's worth." And on the 3rd of August following, John writes again, "My father and mother gives you thanks for the single money you sent him, and he hath sent you money for them by John Saunders."

Whilst coin was thus comparatively scarce, we read of abundance of good cheer, and it was very usual to make presents of provisions and luxuries for the table. From Leicester were sent flicks or flitches of bacon, shields of brawn, cheeses frequently, and on one occasion five dozen of fieldfares, to be distributed among friends in the city. From London were sent—a good keg of fresh sturgeon, pomegranates, and a box of marmalade, and occasionally a sugar-loaf. But at Christmas Sir William Heyricke was always bountiful in despatching a large cargo of grocery and spices, which was welcomed with hearty and uproarious gratitude. The alderman's account of his family's demonstrations in this respect on St. Stephen's day (the morrow of Christmas) in the year 1614, is amusing. He tells his brother that his last letter had been "more welcome than all the music we have had since Christmas, and yet we have had pretty store both of our own and other; and the same day we were busy with holding up hands and spoons to you, out of porridge and pyes, in the remembrance of your great liberality of fruit and spice, which God send you long life to continue, for of that day we have not missed any St. Stephen this 47 year to have as many guests as my house would hold, I thank God for it."

This old custom of holding up hands and spoons is again mentioned at Christmas, 1616: "This day (he is writing upon another St. Stephen's) "I have had thirty or near at dinner, and with wine and sugar, and hands held up so high as we could, we remembered Wood Street; and though we can do no more, yet in our prayers,

(6) The great want of half-pence and farthings impelled the almost general use, among alehouse-keepers, chandlers, grocers, vintners, and other traders, of private tokens of lead, tin, latten, and it is said of leather. There were frequent and well-founded complaints that their circulation was derogatory of the Queen's princely dignity and honour, and occasioned continual loss to the poor, since for these tokens commodities could only be obtained of the parties by whom they were issued; whilst their repayment in silver coin was an expectation very unlikely to be satisfied. (*Introduction, by J. H. Burn, to the Catalogue of the Cabinet of Tokens presented to the Corporation of London by Henry B. H. Beaufof, Esq.*)

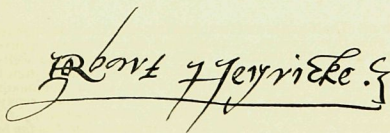
(7) These half-pence, as well as the pennies and two-pences or half-groats, were of silver. They were first issued in 1582, and weighed only four grains. There had been previously, between the years 1561 and 1579, occasional issues of three-farthing pieces, also of silver.



“in our spoons, and in our cups, we do not forget you when time serves.”

Such were some of the holiday and everyday occupations of the townsfolk of Leicester in the reign of James the First. I have confined myself to general topics: as, to enter into the particular matters which form the main subjects of the letters would have occupied too much of your attention. I will only, in conclusion, briefly enumerate as among the more important of them—the king's visit to Leicester in the year 1614, the election of burgesses to parliament in the same year, the incorporation of the Newark Hospital, the purchase of the Newark Grange by the corporation from Sir Thomas Smith, their proposed sale of the Newark Mills, negociations for the purchase of estates at Wanlip, Sweepston, and various other places, and for procuring church preferment for Tobias Heyricke the alderman's son, negociations for proposed marriages of the daughters of both the brothers—to Ashby of Quenby, Babington of Cossington, and other parties, the extraordinary trials for witchcraft at the assizes, and an equally remarkable account of open-air preaching set on foot on the suggestion of Sir William Heyricke, for the benefit of the Newarke Hospital. In addition to these incidental matters of business, there are constant reports from Beaumanor respecting the management of that estate and Sir William Heyricke's rights in the adjacent forest, with some curious details on the planting of trees and agricultural matters, and on the sports of the field as then practised.

Altogether, in my opinion, it would be difficult to find, either in print or still in manuscript, a more interesting series of domestic correspondence than this of Robert Heyricke the old alderman of Leicester and thrice mayor thereof. He always writes to his brother with the warmest affection, combined with an evident respect for one who had become a London citizen, a knight, and a courtier; but at the same time he discusses every subject as it arises with perfect freedom and familiarity,—“as though (he writes on one occasion) I was walking with you at Beaumanor,” or (at another time) “as though I was walking with you in Paul's, a turn and “a turn.” His letters are continued until within a year of his death, which occurred in 1618, at the age of seventy-eight. You have his monumental stone still remaining in St. Martin's church, and his portrait in the Mayor's Parlour at the Town Hall.



AUTOGRAPH OF ROBERT HEYRICKE.







